

Lesson Name : 42

Lesson Title : Babe, the Blue Ox

Course Name : English 2 Part 3 [Honors]

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Essential Instruction



Please read “[Babe the Blue Ox](#)” as told by S.E. Schlosser.

Use your digital notebook to keep notes about new vocabulary and definitions that you may need to reference later.

### Elements of a Folktale

As you might have guessed, the reading for today, “Babe the Blue Ox,” is an example of a **folktale**. Stories about Paul Bunyan and Babe are probably the best-known American **folktales**. It has been said that Paul Bunyan’s footprints formed the thousand lakes of Minnesota, and that water spilling in Bunyan’s logging camp formed the Mississippi River.

What exactly makes today’s story a **folktale**? Well, it contains humor and casual, folksy language. Even more telling, the story contains massive exaggeration. For example:

Well, any creature raised in Paul Bunyan’s camp tended to grow to massive proportions, and Babe was no exception. Folks that stared at him for five minutes could see him growing right before their eyes. He grew so big that 42 axe handles plus a plug of tobacco could fit between his eyes and it took a murder of crows a whole day to fly from one horn to the other.

We know, of course, that an ox can’t possibly be that large! But the exaggeration makes for a good story, so we keep reading anyway.

### Historical Context

Because stories about Paul Bunyan are such an important part of American folklore, let’s take a moment to discuss the character’s origin and **historical context**.

Stories about Paul Bunyan, a giant lumberjack with amazing strength, first circulated around Canadian and American logging camps in the mid-1800s. The stories may have been based on a real lumberjack of the same name, who had earned fame during a French-Canadian rebellion. But the stories soon acquired a life of their own, as hard-working lumberjacks shared stories around the campfire at night, always trying to “top” the previous story.

The stories of Paul Bunyan first entered the wider American folklore canon in the early 1900s, when a newspaper reporter published the stories he had heard in the logging camps. The Paul Bunyan character soon appeared in short stories and even advertisements for the Red River Lumber Company. (Babe the Blue Ox was first introduced in those ads.) Today, you can find Paul Bunyan statues and attractions in several different states, and the character is featured in many movies and books.

It's hard to say for sure why the Paul Bunyan stories became – and have remained – so popular. In the early 1900s, things in America were changing more quickly than ever before (fashion, technology, the economy, lifestyles, etc.), and Americans experienced the unprecedented horrors of World War I. Maybe Americans clung to the Paul Bunyan stories as a reflection of a simpler time, when it was possible to get ahead in life with nothing but hard work and persistence. What do you think?

### Synonyms and Epithets

**Synonyms** are words that have similar meanings. An **epithet** is a word or phrase that describes a person or thing and is used in place of or alongside that person or thing.

**For example:** Paul Bunyan chopped down four thousand trees that day.

**With an epithet:** The hulking lumberjack chopped down four thousand trees that day.

**Or:** Paul Bunyan, the hulking lumberjack, chopped down four thousand trees that day.



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### Vocabulary

For today's vocabulary lesson, let's take a look at some words you're likely to find in folklore. Here are a few words from "Babe the Blue Ox," along with their definitions. Be sure to add the unfamiliar words to your digital notebook for future reference. (Note: We wouldn't recommend using any of these words in formal writing!)

1. **afore** – adverb – slang for "before"
2. **critter** – noun – slang for "creature"
3. **jest** – adv. – slang for "just"
4. **lickety-split** – adv. – slang for "quickly"
5. **yeller** – adj. – slang for "yellow"